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How pracademics can help to address the rigour-relevance gap in business and management schools

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Authors

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At a glance

- Pracademics make a significant contribution to addressing the widely discussed 'rigour-relevance gap' in business schools
- But existing recruitment, development and career paths act as major barriers to fulfilling the potential offered by business school pracademics
- This is illustrated through the experiences of two business school pracademics, who highlight some positive achievements but point out major cultural and systemic barriers
- Recognition in recruitment and promotion processes of the value of practical experience as well as academic qualifications and outputs, would be a major step forward
- These proposed changes are essential if we are to create genuinely 'porous' business schools that combine the benefits of rigorous and relevant teaching, learning and research

Abstract

Growth in the number of pracademics in business schools can make a significant contribution to addressing the 'rigour-relevance gap', which has long been a concern of business and management schools. Influential commentators have argued that business and management research is overly concerned with achieving scholarly impact, primarily through journal publications, to the detriment of relevance to practice. Likewise, teaching and learning in many business schools is regarded as too theoretical and does not prepare students adequately for the 'real world' of business. Not all observers accept this view, but there can be little doubt that the career paths of most business and management academics tend to emphasise

doctoral qualifications and scholarly outputs rather than practical experience of management and leadership. The authors reflect on their experiences as practitioners and academics, working with colleagues with backgrounds within and outside academia. The increasing influence of pracademia can facilitate business research, teaching and learning that has impact beyond the academy. However, there are several barriers to the achievement of this potential, requiring radical and creative solutions. Proposals include enhancing the status of professional doctorates, reforming academic career structures to reward the distinctive contributions of pracademics and creating genuinely 'porous' business schools.

Key words: pracademic; business school; management; rigour; relevance

Introduction

The 'rigour-relevance' debate has been a long-running one in relation to the role and impact of business schools¹, notably in the context of research, but also in relation to teaching and learning. The most critical commentators argue that business schools have 'lost their way' by shifting from a model based primarily on professional or trade schools towards attempting to emulate established academic disciplines by emphasising scientific rigour over relevance to managerial practice (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Irwin, 2019). A corollary of this trend has been a rebalancing of the staff base of many business schools away from lecturers with experience of industry and commerce towards career academics with doctoral qualifications, records of publication in academic journals and typically no experience of working in managerial roles outside the academic sector. This is recognised, for example, by AACSB, a leading accreditation body for business schools, which categorises academic staff into Scholarly Academics, Scholarly Practitioners and Instructional Practitioners (AACSB, 2021).

Recent research has identified the existence and apparent growth of a group of people working in academic posts across the HE sector who might be described as 'pracademics' (Dickinson et al., 2022; Hollweck et al., 2021; Susskind, 2013). Definitions vary and hard data is difficult to come by, but there are indications that this trend is being replicated in parts of the business school sector, typically in schools that emphasise the applied focus of their teaching and research activities (Panda, 2014). This is certainly the case in the institution in which the two authors work and reflects the experience of one of the authors who has held academic and research leadership positions in three UK business schools over the past 20+ years.

The apparently increasing significance of business school pracademics raises the prospect of a (perhaps partial) solution to the rigour-relevance conundrum. Put simply, academic staff with practical experience but without advanced qualifications such as doctorates are regarded as unlikely to possess the academic credibility and approach necessary to deliver a university-standard educational experience or to publish research findings in 'top' journals. Conversely, as noted earlier, 'pure' academics without business experience have the qualifications and

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¹ We use the term 'business school' as a shorthand to describe academic schools that teach and research topics related to business and management. Some such organisations are known as schools or departments of management, or similar.

experience required to produce research outputs but have a limited basis on which to explore practical implications with students or to work with managers to understand the practical implications of their research.

The 'rigour-relevance' debate tends to characterise academics focused on scholarly research and those concerned primarily with impact on practice as 'two tribes' (Gulati, 2007) with their own distinctive language and culture that make it difficult or impossible for them to work together (Kieser and Leiner, 2009). It can be argued that 'pracademics' with varying combinations of academic and practitioner backgrounds, represent a potential 'middle way' that can challenge the pessimistic prognosis suggested by the 'two tribes' model. Panda (2014) identifies several key differences between academic scholars and research executives, which pose a challenge to those who propose that the two approaches be reconciled:

The academic scholars are mandated to create knowledge, whereas corporate executives are expected to create wealth ... The academic scholars are rational in their thinking process, whereas corporate executives rely on both rational and intuitive thought processes ... Sense of urgency is valued more in the corporate community compared to in the academic community ... Academic scholars tend to prefer complex language laden with academic jargons, whereas corporate executives prefer simple language. (Panda 2014, 144)

Of course, these depictions of academics and practitioners are – as the author recognises - generalisations that do not do justice to the wide range of backgrounds, experience and cultures both within and between these idealised groups. Of course, there are academics who are excellent at engaging with business and there are practitioners with high quality research outputs in leading journals. However, the academic-practitioner-pracademic model broadly reflects the observations and experiences of the two authors of this chapter, both of whom have worked inside and outside of academia over the course of their careers, interacting with colleagues and stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds.

Pracademics who offer a combination of 'academic' and 'practitioner' backgrounds, experience and competences have the potential, in theory, to make a significant contribution to bridging the gap between rigour and relevance. The literature to date on the pracademia phenomenon is limited and focuses primarily on disciplines with strong professional links, such as law, architecture, public policy and education. In addition to Panda's (2014) auto-ethnographic paper mentioned above, McNatt et al. (2010) argue for the development of a 'pracademic paradigm' as one possible approach to addressing the gap between the 'academic world' and the 'practitioner world' in relation to management research.

As is often the case with relatively new (or recently discovered) phenomena, definitions of 'pracademics' or 'pracademia' vary and the nature of the concept is influenced, arguably, by the disciplinary and professional context which is being considered. Some 'pracademics' simultaneously run private practices and teach in universities (Susskind 2013) whereas others are engaged in educational or public policy-related activities. For example, Hollweck et al. (2021) focus on the education sector and their definition of pracademics includes practicing teachers who are undertaking part-time university programmes. After reviewing a range of definitions, they settle on a conceptual approach:

'... we conceptualize pracademia as the dynamic connecting or liminal space between educational research and the classroom, school, and policymaking (2021; 7)

This conceptualisation can, in principle, be translated to a business and management context. Pracademics in this field could be described as occupying a 'liminal space' between academia and business, although the extent to which business school pracademics are actively involved in management outside academia is typically limited. A more common model, in the authors' experience, is for business school pracademics to retain links with professional and business networks and to be actively involved with business engagement activities such as student placements, guest lectures, consultancy and knowledge exchange projects. Business schools are increasingly building links with practising managers through Entrepreneurs in Residence or Executives in Residence and by the engagement of business representatives on advisory boards and curriculum development processes. Guest lectures by business professionals are relatively common and many part-time adjunct or associate teaching staff are practising business owners or managers.

These trends suggest that pracademia is becoming an important influence on teaching, learning and research across many business schools, in the UK and internationally. It might be expected that the combination of pracademics in academic roles and increasing external engagement with business school activities would result in an observable narrowing of the gap between rigour and relevance. This would be evident, for example, in more practically based teaching and learning programmes and research that has a demonstrable impact on policy and practice. While there are examples of movement in these directions (CABS 2021), commentary by leading professional organisations and influential commentators suggest that there is still a long way to go (RRBM, 2022). The experiences and observations of the authors, suggest that significant barriers remain to the effective reconciliation of rigour and relevance through pracademia in business schools.

A pracademic's tale

The Fairy Tale

I had done it, after many weeks of preparation and much hard work, I had managed to secure a job as an academic. I was over the moon. I had even managed to negotiate a position as Senior Lecturer, based on my twenty plus years of management experience. The future was bright. OK, so I might not change the world, but at least I would be in a position to contribute positively toward society and maybe have an impact. Where I had become jaded and cynical in the commercial world, I now had purpose.

I recalled these elated emotions as I ascended the stairs to meet my new Subject Group Leader on my first day at work. Now, some ten years further down the road and a PhD behind me (and still an academic), I know the reality of academia is more complex. I also know that the potential is just as real as I first imagined.

When I reflect on the two worlds of academia and business, each seems to have a view of the other as challenging to engage with and significantly opaque. A sweeping generalisation maybe. But I would also counter this with the view that at the confluence of these two worlds pracademics really can make a difference. Here's how.

The value of analogies

In my early days as an academic I had significant imposter syndrome. My rhetoric and an MBA had got me through the door but now I had to actually know what I was doing. I did lots of reading in an attempt to be as learned as my established scholarly colleagues. It helped.

But what soon became apparent within my teaching was the value of analogies built from my experiences. Where I would be introducing a concept and associated theory this would often be met with stony silence or quizzical expressions from the students. I realised they weren't really getting it, so I flipped my approach to telling them about a situation in the business world and then built the theory around this. Taking them from a social construct they understood to a new way of looking at this from a theoretical perspective. They got it and moreover were keen to chat about it and explore further. With over twenty years of business experience in a wide range of areas I had an almost limitless supply of stories I could relate from my experiences which has added as much value as my reading. It also occurred to me that the vast majority of our students aspire to be practitioners not academics, so when we talk about cold theory this does not have the same engagement factor as tales from the coal face.

Pracademics as Interpreters

The commercial world is not too concerned about the academic merit of research (e.g., REF contribution). It wants research to be validated in some way, but more than this businesses need to be able to see the relevance and benefits. Simultaneously academic research is driven by publication, ranking, impact and esteem. All of which might well coalesce into a neat Venn diagram (Figure 1). However, both sides will likely retain their self-interested focus, not to a point of win-lose, more win-whatever. But the potential here is staggering. During my time as a leader in a medium sized management consultancy, we had a significant influence on the UK business community, more so than the local business schools. We did this with perhaps 5-10% of the staffing of a business school with the vast majority having significantly less academic knowledge than my academic colleagues. Of course, supporting business is not the main priority for universities, but engaging with it is a must. As pracademics we have a window into both of these worlds and their specific needs around rigour and relevance and it is from this standpoint we need to engage and seek out the win-win opportunities and capitalise on the vast potential at the nexus of academia and business.

Challenging the paradigm and bringing common sense

HEI's are oil tankers. SME's speed boats and PLC's cruise ships. Each operating in the same seas but with vastly different capabilities and aspirations. Universities have long histories and traditions that are reinforced by hierarchies and structures, perpetuating that which has gone before. The commercial world is the survival of the fittest and most adaptive. These two cultures drive very different approaches. Meetings in academia can at times seem to be without focus or outcome, where I have witnessed colleagues take no notes on allocated actions and then simply not follow through on them, with no accountability. Were this to occur in the commercial world, 'words' would be had, and disciplinary actions might follow. Of course, this type of behaviour is not ubiquitous across HE, but neither is it uncommon. I have to admit, that after 10 years as an academic I have in part gone native and am more relaxed in driving meetings and projects forward compared to my consultancy days. However, the challenge for effective and efficient systems in large and complex organisations like universities is significant, where once again as pracademics we have to attempt to retain our broader experiences and bring common sense and professionalism to bear in a culture where tradition and hierarchies are often more prevalent. This may not be easy, I have witnessed pracademics come into HE and soon become exasperated by the culture, only to head back into industry or go native themselves. HEI's may well be missing a trick here by not capitalising on good practice of those coming in from industry and simply expecting the individuals to adapt to HE with no value placed on reciprocity.

Conclusion

Strong sectoral cultures lead to tunnel vision for both academics and business practitioners, resulting in missed opportunities for both parties. Synergies across these two worlds can be facilitated by those who have an intimate cultural understanding of both, pracademics. As indicated in the 'Pracademic Today' diagram below HEI's currently do this with a range of initiatives such as KTP's and student projects. However, this is only scratching the surface, even the suggested evolution of this model to 'Pracademia Tomorrow' (below), itself aspirational, will still fall short of the true potential of a cultural revolution within HEIs. A culture where it is expected and seen as the norm to have a balance of research and practice-based staff, recognising the value of industry experience and what it can bring to academia. Indeed, where HEIs are well placed to develop practitioners' academic knowledge and skills they should also consider the reverse and investigate and incentivise routes for academic focused colleagues to gain and maintain industry experience. This notion of both populations learning from each other and this being recognised as positively contributing to career progression would be a significant culture change signal internally and externally. A future where I could see all academics undertaking a significant industry sabbatical every few years, creating vast opportunities and kick starting the culture change that's needed. Where industry professionals could reciprocate and be hosted by HEIs for a period where they are supported to research the solutions to the business challenges of the day. Building a culture where a KTP is just as valued as a high-ranking journal publication, where a professional doctorate has parity of esteem as a PhD and a seasoned CEO is as valued as a professor.

A research leader's tale

My academic career has been far from typical, although I have spent most of the past 40 years of my working life in academic institutions. Much of my early career was spent on short-term research contracts in three university-based research centres funded almost entirely by external grants and contracts. I did not complete my doctorate, started in 1980, until 27 years later when I was already in a senior position in one of these research centres. In between research contracts, I had three periods of working in economic consultancies, finally becoming research director of a small consultancy business. My first 'proper' academic post came in 2011, when I was appointed as senior lecturer in a research-intensive business school. I have since taken up research leadership roles, including my most recent post as Associate Dean in a business school with a mission to 'transform lives' through applied research, teaching and learning.

Reflecting on my own journey, I would not describe myself as a typical pracademic, despite having spent around 10 years working in commercial organisations. Nor have I followed a traditional academic career path. Until 10 years ago, my working environment was more akin to private sector consultancies and the skills I acquired were helpful when I entered the 'real' consultancy sector. Performance was measured in relation to income targets, financial contribution and client satisfaction rather than publications or scholarly impact. Fortunately for my academic career, I produced sufficient academic outputs to enable me to obtain a doctorate by published works and eventually to be awarded the title of Professor.

I often reflect that, had I entered the academic world for the first time during the past 10 years or so, it would have been highly unlikely that I would have been appointed as a lecturer, let alone reach the level of professor and academic leader. Newly appointed colleagues face

enormous pressure to publish in high level journals while simultaneously providing high quality teaching and learning and achieving 'impact' through engagement with external stakeholders. For those entering business schools following a sometimes-prolonged period of working in business, public sector or not-for-profit organisations, the pressures can be even more intense, to the point of negating the potentially positive contribution that these colleagues can make to research, teaching, learning and external impact.

My co-author's experience of imposter syndrome is reflected in my own feelings, despite having spent a considerable proportion of my career in academic institutions. My lack of a doctoral qualification and publication record that contains a large number of 'non-standard' outputs put me at a disadvantage – or so I felt – in relation to many of my peers. It did not occur to me that my experience of winning research grants and consultancy projects, managing these projects, liaising with partners and clients, managing teams of highly qualified colleagues and meeting challenging deadlines within tight resource constraints were potentially valuable in the academic world. Unfortunately, neither did this occur to many institutional leaders, who viewed research success primarily in terms of publications, research grants and successful supervision of doctoral students (incidentally something that can be difficult for pracademics to achieve).

In my long experience in academia and consultancy, I have worked with many colleagues who might have been labelled as 'pracademics', even before the term became popular in the academic literature. Some of the most effective teachers in fields such as marketing and business strategy entered academia from business or professional practice, in most cases without doctorates or records of academic publications. Some of these colleagues quickly returned to practice, whereas others became immersed in the academic world, becoming published authors and in some cases attaining senior academic or professorial status. But these colleagues are in the minority. Many remain in academia as highly effective, popular and hard-working colleagues who go largely unnoticed by the academic hierarchy. Their achievements in relation to business engagement, networking and knowledge exchange tend not to be recognised in recruitment or promotion criteria. As a result, the cultural shifts that are necessary to reduce the rigour-relevance gap are extremely slow in emerging, and the existing academic culture dominates in most business schools.

Many of my colleagues in applied research and consultancy were highly qualified and had the potential to develop into effective academics or pracademics if they so wished. In most cases they did not do so, preferring to remain in consultancy or to move into leadership roles in the not-for-profit, social enterprise or public sectors. Whether this is by choice, or whether structural factors inhibited moves into the academic world, I would argue that many of these former colleagues could make significant contributions to business school research, teaching and learning, had the pracademic route been more open to them at the time. The concept of the 'porous' university (Stewart, 2015) is highly relevant to the business school mission, and many of my former colleagues could – in principle – play a significant role in bringing together the worlds of academia and business leadership.

My experience of working with and latterly leading colleagues with non-standard academic career histories reflects both my own and my co-author's observations that business schools are not, in general, making the most of the potential of pracademics to help to address one of the most pressing strategic issues facing business schools, namely how to maintain high academic standards while addressing wider societal challenges and preparing students for the complex and challenging world of the future (Cornuel et al., 2022; Moratis and Melissen,

2022). While there are many examples of business schools achieving societal impact with the contribution of pracademics (CABS, 2021) there are equally many examples of unfulfilled potential leading in some cases to pracademics returning to practice or going native by transforming into career academics focused on producing academic outputs in journals, with limited impact on practice.

Enhancing pracademics' contribution to business school success

Several institutions have put in place procedures and programmes to assist pracademics to transition into academic roles. Our own institution has introduced an 'Academic Careers Framework' that sets out three potential routes to promotion; Research and Innovation, Teaching and Learning, and External and Professional Engagement (Sheffield Hallam University, 2022), with guidance and mentoring to support colleagues through the process. These initiatives have had varying degrees of success, but it is notable that their overwhelming focus is upon assimilating recruits with practice backgrounds into the culture, routines, processes and expectations of academia. For example, newly recruited pracademics are typically required or encouraged to attend refresher or conversion teaching courses and (like other new recruits) to participate in various courses designed to ensure that they are familiar with institutional rules, regulations and processes regarding finance, equality and diversity, health and safety and so on. The direction of travel in terms of integration is almost exclusively one way. There is little recognition of the experience and insights brought into the institution by recruits from outside of academia.

We argue, therefore, that academic institutions such as business schools have a lot to do to ensure that they are adapting to, and maximising the benefit from, the experiences, skills and cultures that pracademics can bring to the academic world. Rebalancing the integration process to encourage two-way learning as well as one-way assimilation is essential, and this needs to be built into business school cultures and activities as pracademics become more embedded in, and influential on, teaching, learning and research. We suggest the following as starting points for discussion:

- Greater flexibility is needed around qualification requirements for lecturing posts, and simultaneously greater recognition of the value to business schools of business and related experience and qualifications. Most business schools now require a doctorate (completed or at least in progress) as a minimum qualification for entry-level lecturing posts. This immediately rules out many people with the potential to make a huge contribution to both rigour and relevance, and advantages those who have chosen the 'pure' academic route, potentially exacerbating the rigour-relevance gap.
- Having said this, we recognise the importance of business school faculty obtaining higher-level qualifications, notably doctorates. This is reinforced, for example, by accrediting bodies such as AACSB, which expect most business school academics too be qualified to doctoral level. Almost by definition, pracademics have had fewer opportunities to undertake doctoral study which – in the UK at least – tends to be of limited perceived value in the business environment. Therefore, support, financial and in terms of time, for newly appointed pracademics should be provided to complete doctoral qualifications. This has been the case in the authors' current business school, with several colleagues (including one of the authors) achieving doctorates while working as lecturers.

- The conventional route to a doctorate, through 3- or 4-years' full-time study to achieve a PhD qualification, is not appropriate for most pracademics who have considerable professional and life experience, but limited time to undergo conventional PhD research. 'Non-standard' routes such as professional doctorates (for example the DBA) or doctorates by publication represent more viable and appropriate routes, and indeed many pracademics have followed this path. However, there remains an often-unstated privileging of 'standard' PhDs over other routes among a sizeable group of academics, which can lead pracademic colleagues to believe that they are achieving an inferior qualification that has a lower status than a conventional PhD. This needs to change, and business schools have an important role to play in promoting the benefits of diverse routes to doctoral qualifications.
- Academic institutions should be more open to recognising professional and business experience and qualifications in career development processes. Typically, such qualifications are of limited value to pracademics seeking promotion, especially through career pathways linked to research achievement. Even in the growing number of institutions – including the authors' - for which external engagement is seen as a legitimate route to promotion, qualifications and experience gained outside of the academic environment tend to be treated less favourably than academic qualifications, outputs and 'citizenship'.
- Most business school pracademics have travelled in one direction – from practice to academia – with the flow from 'pure' academia to practice being relatively light. One reason for this is the limited practical value of doctoral qualifications, but it also reflects the difficulty of returning to academia after a period in practice. Research outputs, teaching experience and citizenship all suffer and experience outside academia is, as we have argued, not highly valued in promotion processes. One of the authors is unusual in that his career journey involved three 'return trips' from practice to academia, but this is not common. The creation of 'porous business schools' would be a significant step in the direction of making it easier for academics to move into non-academic roles outside HE, and to return to HE without detriment to their career ambitions in either context.
- It is important to ensure that the skills and experience of pracademics are utilised effectively to improve business schools' processes and, where appropriate, to develop staff and student skills in areas such as project management, team leadership and relationship management. Assigning pracademics, together with academics and professional service colleagues, to lead improvement projects, and recognising the value of this type of contribution in performance evaluation and promotion processes, would be a good way of capitalising on the experience of pracademics.
- Business schools should approach industry-based research with a win-win focus, not just simply collecting data and vanishing. Pracademics can play a significant role in sharing analysis and results with external partners and exploring other opportunities for synergies. In so doing, business schools can enhance the value and recognition of building and maintaining links with industry for mutual benefit.
- Routes for business and other stakeholders to access HE are still rather opaque, even for the most partnership-focused of business schools (Rybníček and Königsgruber, 2019). There is much expertise in universities that can add value to practice, but businesses see HEIs as complex and bureaucratic; just finding the right person to talk too can be onerous and often a bridge too far. Pracademics, with their experience,

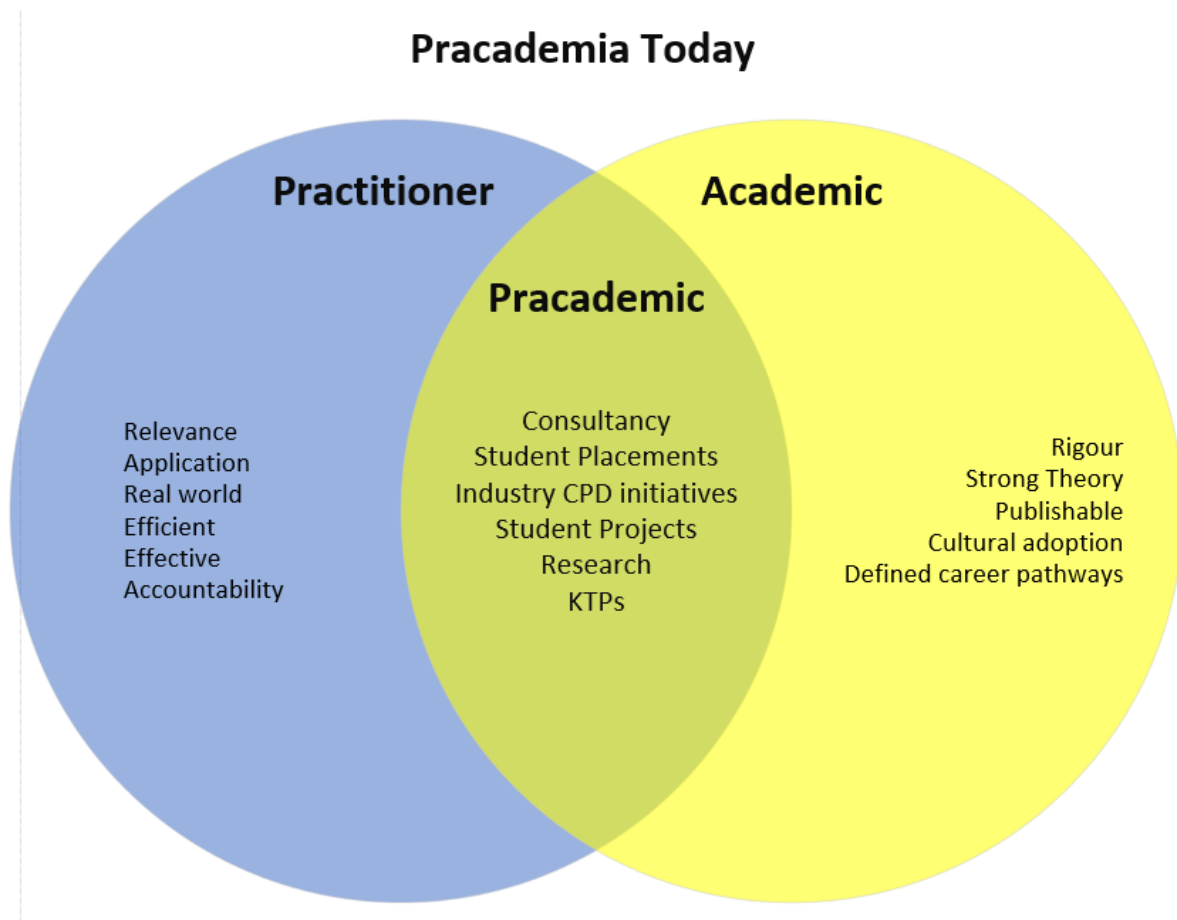
background, context and practice-driven approach to communication, can play an important role in helping businesses to navigate the complexities of collaborating with business schools, and vice versa.

- Finally, as illustrated by one of the authors' experiences, pracademics should work closely with experienced academics in developing learning content, in particular building case study learning content from their experiences. This of course requires pracademics to develop their teaching and learning skills, but crucially it requires parity of esteem and mutual respect between academic and practice-based knowledge, adding value to the experiences of colleagues, students and the wider business community. Building such a culture is central to addressing the rigour-relevance gap and to ensuring that business schools continue to be relevant to addressing the challenging issues that will face us all in future.

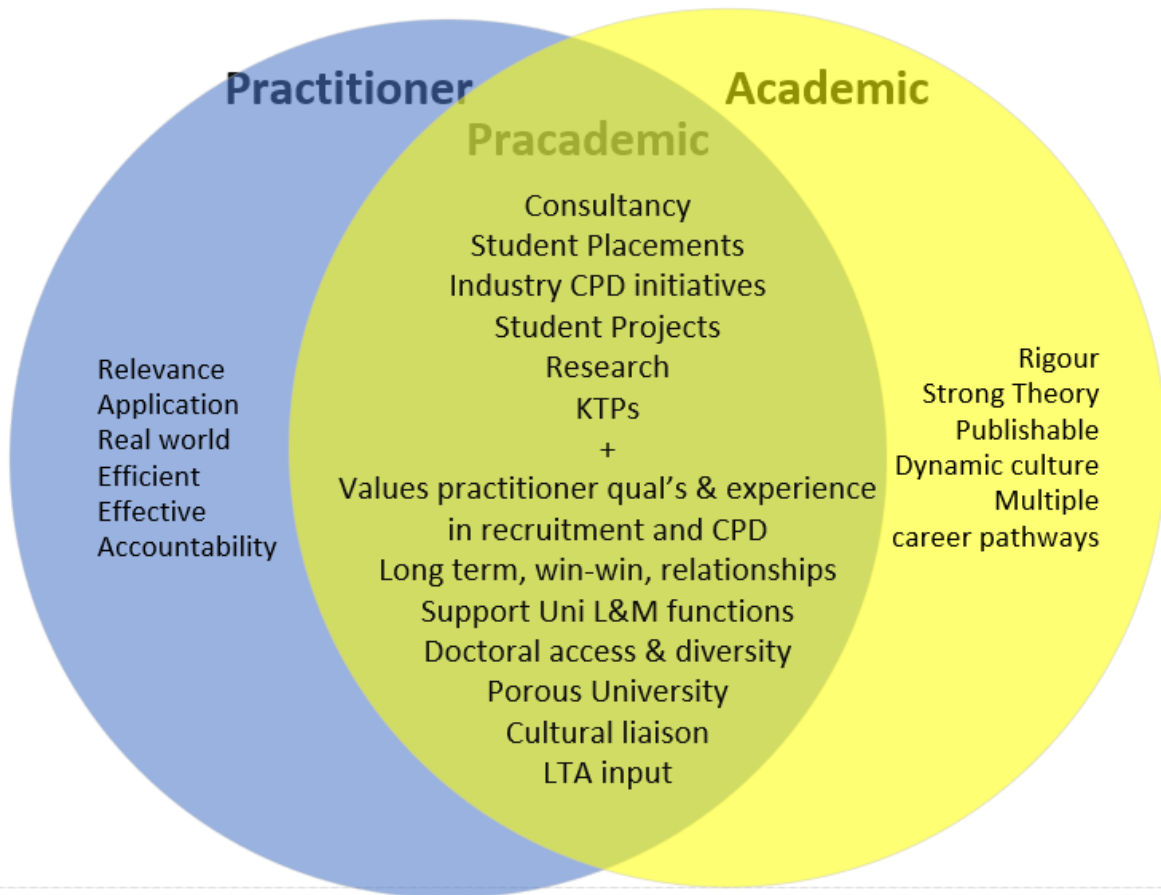
Reflection points

- To what extent do the experiences of business school pracademics differ from those in more 'professional' disciplines such as education, law or health?
- How can business schools more effectively recognise and reward practical business experience and qualifications in recruitment and promotion, while ensuring high academic standards?
- How can the perceived value of 'non-standard' routes to doctoral qualifications be enhanced?
- What should a 'porous' business school look like and how can parity of esteem between 'academics' and 'pracademics' be achieved?

Figure 1. Pracademia, today and tomorrow



Pracademia Tomorrow?



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